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Educational goods and values: A framework for decision-makers

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Abstract

This paper articulates a framework suitable for use when making decisions about education policy. Decision-makers should establish what the feasible options are, and evaluate them in terms of their contribution to the development, and distribution, of educational goods in children, balanced against the negative effect of policies on important independent values. The paper articulates a theory of educational goods by reference to six capacities that children should develop – economic productivity, autonomy, democratic competence, healthy personal relationships, treating others as equals, and personal fulfilment. It demarcates three distributive values – adequacy, equality, and benefitting the less advantaged. And it distinguishes several independent values – childhood goods, parents’ interests, respect for democratic processes, and freedom of residence and occupation.

Keywords

Values; Flourishing; Educational Goods; Childhood Goods; Educational Justice; Aims of education

Educational decision making involves value judgments. As decision makers aim for improvements, they need standards that tell them what counts as an improvement. However, they typically lack a rich and sophisticated language for talking about values and articulating trade-offs. Our main purpose in this paper is to enrich the language available to educational decision makers, and to the researchers whose work informs their deliberation, by offering a framework for thinking about the goals of education. The values (or range of values) commonly held in Western countries today clearly are not the same as those held in all other countries and at all other times. As a result, our framework has broad, but may not have universal, relevance.

We have coined the term “educational goods” to refer to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that children develop both for their benefit and for the benefit of others. These goods are varied, including cognitive skills, the ability to work with others, and appreciation of

beauty, among many others. We offer a way of thinking with some detail and precision about the educational goods that educators should aim for in schools. Defining educational goods is the first goal of this paper.

Decision makers typically care not only about the average level of educational goods that students acquire but also about how these goods are distributed across children. Their evaluation of a policy will depend on how the policy affects the overall distribution of educational goods in combination with the importance that they place on different distributive principles. One decision maker may place substantial weight on equalizing educational goods, while another may focus more on improving the educational goods of those with the least. The second goal of the paper is to lay out clearly the distributive considerations commonly relevant to education policy choices.

The level and distribution of educational goods are not the only normative considerations at stake in educational decisions. Our third goal is to identify and to provide a language for considering other values that bear on those decisions. First among these, and perhaps particularly salient to educators, are what we term “childhood goods”: the features of the child’s daily experience that matter independently of their contribution to the development of educational goods. We also identify four additional values that regularly come into play in education decisions: respect for the democratic process, parents’ interest in their children, freedom of residential and occupational choice, and the consumption of other goods such as housing, food or entertainment.

In a complex world, values are often in tension. Explicit and careful consideration of these tensions can lead to better policy decisions. Policy makers are sometimes reluctant to discuss trade-offs because they want to avoid talking about the negative aspects of policy choices. In the United States, for example, both researchers and politicians have focused heavily on student achievement – understood as performance on standardized tests in mathematics and reading – and its distribution. A focus on these outcomes may come at the cost of other goals such as students’ ability to work collaboratively or to appreciate music or art. While few policy makers or voters believe that standardized test performance is the sole purpose of schooling, those who seek support for accountability policies that rely on test scores have an incentive to downplay the effects on other valued outcomes.¹ Despite political pressures to obscure trade-offs, good policy making requires awareness of how decisions are likely to affect the full range of values at stake. By offering an explicit and extensive, but manageable, list of those values, we hope ultimately to improve the quality of policy decisions.

Two clarifications. First, throughout this paper, we assume that the decision-makers in question have limited ability to affect the context within which the schooling system is nested. The society itself might be highly unequal and strongly individualistic, like the contemporary US, and decision-makers might regret this fact. If they had the power to change the wider society they might choose to do so, which in turn might lead them to make different decisions about schooling. For example, if they could eliminate residential segregation in the US, their decisions about how to fund schools might change. However, for our purposes, we assume that some aspects of society are outside of the decision makers’ control. Even with these constraints, decision makers have some discretion over educational decisions and the framework that we outline can help to guide them.

Second, although the approach we suggest here focuses on the promotion and distribution of flourishing, it could readily be supplemented by non-consequentialist considerations. Some

¹ See Rothstein (2008).

educational goods may be important for meeting moral claims that matter independently of flourishing, and some of those claims may act as constraints on the pursuit of flourishing and its valuable distribution. For example, we talk, later, about the capacity for personal autonomy. That typically contributes to flourishing but some theorists regard people as having a claim to it for other reasons. To meet those claims we might have to limit the pursuit of flourishing, or particular ways of distributing it. Furthermore, some of the independent values which, we say, can reasonably be balanced against educational goods and the distributive values we specify, may be important independently of their contribution to flourishing. The most obvious example here is respect for democratic processes, which some regard as owed to people in virtue of their moral status as citizens, not because it makes their lives go better or contributes to their flourishing. The fact that we present here a consequentialist framework for educational decision-making that gives pride of place to flourishing does not mean that we regard these other considerations as irrelevant or misconceived.

1. Educational goods

Educational goods consist of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes that inhere in people and have the potential to contribute to their own flourishing and the flourishing of others. Adults deliberately influence which educational goods children develop by the way that they raise them and school them. Many features of children's upbringing are involved. How parents talk to, discipline, and socialize their children are as relevant to the development of educational goods as are experiences in day care, school, and other formal settings outside the family. The educational process begins before children enter formal schooling and carries on after they leave it. Most people continue to acquire knowledge and skills, and their attitudes and dispositions evolve, over the life course.

This paper focuses on the processes producing educational goods prior to adulthood, because that is when educational goods are produced most rapidly, and because deficits in childhood are difficult to eliminate in adulthood. Moreover, during this period public policies, primarily in the form of schooling, have great leverage on the production of educational goods. Most industrialized societies have taken responsibility for the development of educational goods in children, creating large-scale, heavily resourced institutions - namely schools - for that purpose.

We focus, further, on decision making linked directly to schooling, even though children also develop educational goods at home, at the playground, and in early childhood educational settings. Similarly, health policies, tax policies and housing policies can all affect children's educational development. Although the division of policy sectors is artificial, decision makers are bound to focus on the values that are most readily realized by the levers at their disposal. Schools are the natural focus because they are designed specifically to produce educational goods in children.

We have characterized educational goods as 'knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions'. Knowledge, in this context, and to simplify greatly, involves both understanding and warranted true belief; for example, knowing the names of the US Presidents, knowing the branches of the US government, understanding how an engine works or how a law is passed, or knowing that the square of a triangle's hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of its other two sides. Skills involve being able to do things; for example, to analyze data, to identify errors

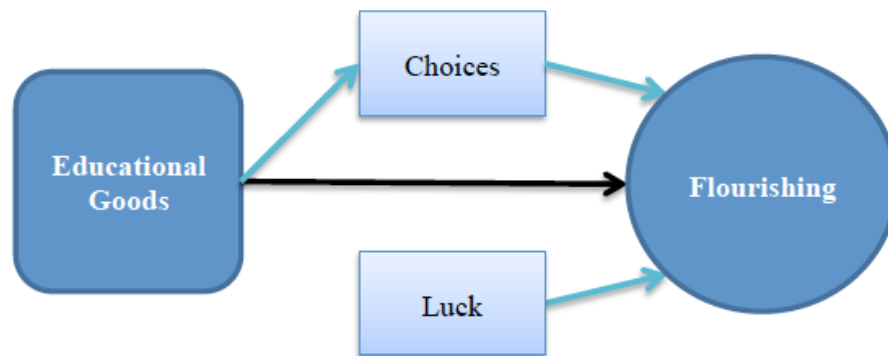
in reasoning, to plan and cook a meal, to negotiate a compromise. Dispositions are inclinations, often unconscious and sometimes even irrational, to deploy whatever skills and knowledge one has in particular situations; courage, for example, is a disposition to act in particular ways when confronted with danger. Attitudes are the conscious bases for motivation that normally, but not always, accompany dispositions, and result in action when triggered by external stimuli; one might have an attitude of respect for people who are manifestly kind. Dispositions and attitudes are usually, but not always, congruent: somebody might consciously believe that they should exercise regularly and yet, contrary to their attitude, when faced with the choice of stairs or an elevator, still choose the elevator. As we shall make clear in the next section, educators should usually be aiming to instill both dispositions and corresponding attitudes.²

The word “goods” may suggest concrete or material commodities but for us it means only that the things referred to are positive, in the sense that they contribute to valuable outcomes for the individual possessing them or for others, either in the present or in the future. Cognitive skills and socio-emotional capacities are educational goods because they generate value in the current period for those who are being educated and contribute to their future income and health, and hence to their overall well-being. They also benefit others, whose lives go better through the actions of those being educated. Attitudes and dispositions that enable and incline individuals to participate responsibly in the democratic process may sometimes benefit the individuals themselves, and may, at other times, benefit only other members of their polity. They are educational goods in both cases.

The fundamental value that underlies our discussion of educational goods is human flourishing. Educational goods help people’s lives go well – and what matters, ultimately, is the creation and distribution of opportunities for people to flourish. We focus on opportunities for flourishing, rather than flourishing itself, because the most that educational goods can do is equip people with what they need for their lives to go well, including the capacity to make good choices. Whether people do in fact choose well is a further question. Luck – serious injury or illness, for example - is also bound to play a role in determining the extent of people’s flourishing, however well-equipped they are, and however well they choose. Figure 1 describes this relationship.

FIGURE 1

² Another way of talking about dispositions and attitudes, widely used by philosophers, is as *virtues*. Virtues consist in dispositions to act and corresponding appropriate understandings and valuing. We avoid the language of virtue mainly because in political discourse in the US it has connotations likely to alienate many policymakers.



As a guiding principle “produce opportunities for human flourishing”³ is not, on its own, particularly helpful, because it does not describe flourishing in enough detail to identify human qualities that are likely to enhance it. One needs to know what constitutes human well-being in order to have a sense of what knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes to aim for.

Although there is widespread agreement on some elements of flourishing, there is no consensus theory of flourishing overall.³ Rather than attempting to defend a full view, we rely on relatively uncontroversial assumptions about some of the constituents and prerequisites of a flourishing life. Disagreement will persist, but, the approach is useful because it lays out a method for moving from theories of flourishing to a determination of which educational goods to pursue and, ultimately, to which education policies and practices to choose.

The value of any given set of knowledge and skills depends on context. In the US today, literacy is more or less essential for the labor market success that generates an income, but it was much less important in the 1700s. Physical strength and coordination are less valuable today than they were then and technological change has reduced their value even since the 1970s. Some capacities of course, like the capacity to defer gratification, or the cognitive capacities that psychologists call “executive function” (planning for the future, attention, working memory, connecting past experiences to present situations), may be essential for some reasonably high level of well-being regardless of context. Decision makers therefore have to supplement the directive “promote flourishing” with a set of intermediate educational aims which are the specific educational goods—knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes—they should be trying to create in their particular context.

³ The two major kinds of theory of flourishing are objective, and subjective. Objectivist theories identify some precepts and/or activities and pursuits following or participating in which constitutes flourishing. Many religious theories specify a precept such as “abide by God’s commands”; but there are also ‘objective list’ theories that might include such items as “maintaining physical and mental health”, “participating in complex and socially valuable work”, and “engaging in intimate personal relationships”. Subjectivist theories fall into two categories. Some, “conscious state” theories, identify certain kinds of feeling or subjective experience -- hedonistic theories, for example, hold that flourishing consists in feeling happy. Other subjective theories specify some relationship between an internal state of the agent and the state of the world; economists, for example, commonly treat the extent to which an agent’s preferences are satisfied as a measure of flourishing. For different objective theories, and illuminating discussion, see Griffin (1985) and Raz (1986); for influential subjective theories see Sumner (1996) and Mill (1867). Our overall approach has considerable affinities to the capabilities approach to justice (see, eg, Nussbaum 2000) as well as to Raz’s (1986) theory of freedom. See also Synowich (2000).

2. Specifying educational goods

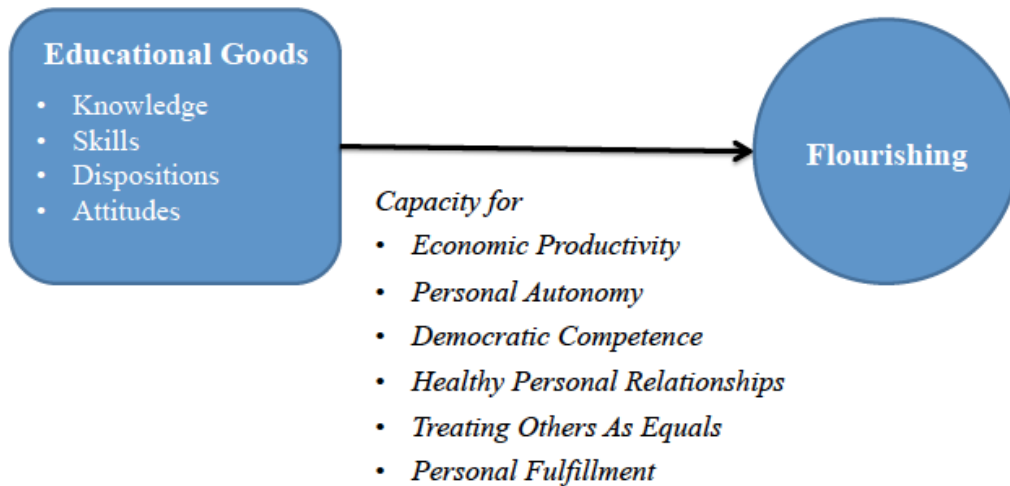
Constructing a comprehensive list of the specific knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes needed to enable people to flourish and contribute to the flourishing of others would be an unmanageable task. The list would be extremely long, and the precise items on it would vary across contexts. But we can identify, at a general level, six capacities that everyone should have in modern societies, and which, when deployed effectively in appropriate circumstances, will tend to support the flourishing of both the agent herself and others in her society. These capacities – and the dispositions to act on them in the right circumstances – should guide decision makers in determining what specific educational goods to foster: the capacities for economic productivity, personal autonomy, democratic competence, healthy personal relations, regarding others as equals, and personal fulfillment. Figure 2 shows this relationship between educational goods and the capacities that contribute to flourishing.⁴

2.1 Capacity for Economic Productivity

In market economies, unless an individual has extremely wealthy parents or some other source of guaranteed income, flourishing depends on his or her ability to participate effectively in the economy. Some people will not need to work for an income to meet their needs, but we cannot identify most of them in advance, so a sensible policy will aim to equip all children to participate in the economy. Even those with independent sources of income usually benefit from the kinds of capabilities that labor markets reward. Developing individuals' economic productivity – for example through enhancing their cognitive skills – is also in the interest of the broader society: the increased economic capability of the educated person increases the aggregate stock of human capital that society can harness to the benefit of all. Of course, this capacity only benefits the agent, and others, if it is deployed, so alongside the capacity educators should inculcate a disposition to work. As with other dispositions, the educator must exercise and encourage moderation. For most people a flourishing life will be one in which the disposition to work is balanced by other dispositions (to engage in leisure activities, for example, or to devote oneself to friends and family).

FIGURE 2

⁴ The rest of this section contains a greatly condensed and revised version of [reference deleted for anonymity].



2.2 Capacity for personal autonomy

Children benefit from the ability to make and act on well-informed and well thought-out judgments about both how to live, and what to do in their everyday lives. For human beings to flourish they need to engage in activities and relationships that reflect their sense of who they are and what matters to them'. So, for example, some people may flourish within the constraints laid down by the religious strictures of their parents but others may be stunted by those same requirements. Knowledge of other religious views and non-religious views supports flourishing by providing the opportunity for the individual to choose alternatives, or aspects of them. Even with knowledge of the alternatives, the self-knowledge, habits of mind, and strength of character to make the appropriate alternative choice are also needed. The same logic applies to choice of occupation. Some children find themselves under very heavy parental pressure to pursue a particular occupational path. The non-autonomous person will follow the path chosen by her parent because of lack of knowledge of alternatives or because of lack of self-knowledge. The autonomous person, by contrast, will have sufficient knowledge of the relevant variables and sufficient fortitude to make the parental pressure a small influence on her choice. Whether, ultimately, she chooses for or against will depend on her own, independent, judgment of the fit between the occupation and her interests. However, autonomy does not only contribute to flourishing via its significance for major life decisions. In their everyday lives, people make and act on judgments about what to do that are not fully determined by their core values – like what to eat, what leisure activities to engage in, how to use their work time (if they are fortunate enough to have a job which gives them discretion over their time), who to talk to and about what. These too will typically contribute more to their flourishing if they have a reasonable range of valuable options, the capacity to judge for themselves, and freedom to act on that judgment. Again, the dispositions associated with autonomy should be inculcated, but with moderation. The extent to which people benefit from reflection on major questions such as what values to adopt, and even minor questions like how to spend one's leisure time, varies considerably between individuals in ways that educators cannot anticipate.

2.3 Capacity for democratic competence

In a democratic society, citizens benefit from the ability to use their political institutions both to press their own interests and to give due weight to the legitimate interests of others. Educating a child to have the knowledge, skills, and personal attributes that enable and incline her to become an effective and morally decent participant in social life and political processes benefits both her and others. The knowledge and skills needed for democratic competence are various, and depend on context. A basic understanding of the history of a society's political institutions is usually valuable, as is a basic ability and disposition to bring reason and evidence to bear on claims and arguments made by others. Institutions vary considerably in the informational demands they place on citizens, and in the deliberative resources they provide. The US electoral system, for example with its numerous levels of government and frequent elections, places high demands on citizens, especially in those states where candidates for most elections may not register their party affiliation on the ballot paper. Political advertising gives citizens very limited help in their deliberations. Democratic systems with less numerous and frequent elections and more controls over political advertising may make it easier for citizens to participate in an informed and meaningful way. Many policy issues are hard for citizens to evaluate because they lack a good understanding of the way the institutions work, and of the possible side effects of any proposed reform. We are not advancing, here, a particular theory of what constitutes democratically competent behavior. For some theorists obedience to the law suffices, for others actual engagement in the political process is required, and for others still competent behavior might sometimes involve challenging and breaking the law even in a democracy. Exactly what the capacity requires depends on settling these issues. But on any account, *being able to engage* is required, and acquiring the capacity for democratic competence is important.⁵

2.4 Capacity for healthy personal relationships

Recent empirical literature confirms the common sense view that successful personal relationships are at the center of a happy life. The same is likely true of a flourishing life. For most of us, flourishing requires a variety of relationships, including lasting and intimate relationships with others. People derive meaning from their relationships with their spouses, their parents and children, their close friends, and even from looser ties with acquaintances in their neighborhoods and at work. Successful personal relationships require certain attributes – emotional openness, kindness, a willingness to take risks with one's feelings, trust – that do not develop automatically but are in large part responses to one's environment. We can hope that families will provide the kind of environment in which a child will develop these qualities but not all will, and, even if they do, this process can be supplemented and reinforced by other institutions, including schools.

2.5 Capacity to treat others as moral equals

Equal respect for the basic dignity of persons underlies the idea that everybody has the same basic human rights, regardless of their sex, race, religion or nationality, and grounds norms against discrimination in hiring, promotion, and government provision. Regarding others as equals does not require that we care about strangers as much as we do about our family members, or ourselves. Nor does it rule out judgments that people are unequal with respect to attributes like

⁵ See Gutmann (1999); Callan (1997), and Macedo (2003), for a sample of different arguments for the conclusion that promoting democratic competence is an important aim of education.

strength, intelligence, or virtue. It means simply that we think of all people as fundamentally equal in moral status. That attitude and the accompanying dispositions are important for flourishing. Racism, for example, does not have to be legally enforced in order to be damaging. Even without legal discrimination, black Americans continue to be disadvantaged, due not only to the continuing material effects of legal discrimination but also to their treatment by others who, often unconsciously, assume superiority. The experience of slights grounded in assumptions of racial superiority – as with gender, sexuality, or physical or mental abilities - undermines the self-respect and self-confidence of the slighted, making it harder for them to flourish. The impact is worse if the slighted themselves share the attitude that they are inferior, or, while not sharing it, are nonetheless disposed to accept the slights as their due. Developing and, crucially, *exercising*, the capacity to treat other people as moral equals is important, also, for properly balancing the pursuit of one's own flourishing with the contribution one is obliged to make to the flourishing of others.

2.6 Capacity for personal fulfillment

Healthy personal relationships are important for flourishing, but so too are complex and satisfying labor and projects that engage one's physical, aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual faculties. People find great satisfaction in music, literature, and the arts; games and sports; mathematics and science; and religious practice. In these and other activities, they exercise and develop their talents, and meet complex challenges. A great deal of paid work is dreary, or carried out in the context of stressful status hierarchies, and people in such jobs have limited opportunities to flourish at work. School is a place in which children's horizons can be broadened. They can be exposed to – and can develop enthusiasms for and competence in – activities that they would never have encountered through familial and communal networks, and which, sometimes, suit them better than any they would have encountered in those ways.⁶

These six capacities all contribute to flourishing lives. Although they overlap in some cases, they differ one from another, and in some circumstances the decision maker may need to trade them off against each other. Perhaps, for example, the conditions needed to foster children's capacity for personal fulfillment compete with those needed to maximize their economic productivity. If so, decision makers need to judge which of the capacities is more important in that context. Debates about a policy of tracking students into different classrooms - or schools - on the basis of measured ability sometimes invoke beliefs about the relative importance of these different capacities. Advocates of tracking may claim that it better produces the skills and knowledge conducive to economic success while opponents worry about its impact on the capacity to treat others as moral equals, especially in contexts where measured ability correlates with other characteristics such as race or socioeconomic status.

It is important to note, too, the role that institutions other than schooling play in the production (and, sometimes, in frustrating the production) of educational goods. Children are subject to influences from the home, the neighborhood, the media, their peers, and the economy. Children whose home life is dysfunctional may need different educational experiences from other children in order to develop the capacity for healthy emotional relationships. It might be

⁶ On the practical implications of a concern with flourishing see White (2011).

more difficult to foster the capacity for economic participation in a child whose community experiences very high unemployment than in a child who expects her efforts to be rewarded by college and lucrative employment. A political culture short of examples of high-profile reasonable deliberation among politicians who disagree might frustrate the development of democratic competence (on some understandings of what democratic competence demands). We are offering an account of what educational goods should be developed in children, not saying that schools should be left to, or even could, fulfil this task on their own.

A complete theory of flourishing would show how to weigh its different constituent elements against one another. One would then be able to judge, for example, whether somebody whose capacity for economic productivity is very well developed and possesses the other capacities but only to some threshold level, has greater prospects for *overall* flourishing than somebody who has very high levels of those other capacities but is not so economically productive. We do not have such a theory. Like most everybody else, we lack a method for rendering the different constituent elements of flourishing commensurable.⁷ Still, decision makers can make some comparative judgments, even without a fine-tuned conversion measure.

3. Distributive values

What makes educational goods valuable is that they provide the individuals who have them with opportunities to flourish, and to contribute to the flourishing of others. But it matters not only how many opportunities there are overall but also how those opportunities are distributed. Whether directly or indirectly, much public debate about schooling addresses the distribution of educational goods. Efforts to “close the achievement gap” identify one measure of educational goods – performance on standardized tests – and aim to reduce the difference in average test scores, or in the rates at which members of different demographic groups reach proficiency or similar levels of achievement. Advocates of more funding to schools with certain characteristics presumably hope that funding will improve the learning – that is, the level of educational goods – of the students, or some of the students, in those particular schools.

Distributive values typically have two components: (i) a distributive rule and (ii) an object of distribution (a *distribuendum*), to which that rule applies. We propose, without much argument, three distributive values: adequacy of educational goods (adequacy); equality of educational goods (equality), and the distribution of educational goods that most benefits those with the worst prospects for flourishing (benefitting the less advantaged).

⁷ Some education researchers have developed formal methods to attach weights to different valued outcomes within the context of cost-effectiveness analysis. Although that approach typically evaluates projects by the ratio of a project’s costs to the changes in a single outcome of interest, an extended form, called cost-utility analysis, incorporates multiple outcomes by attaching utility weights to each outcome. Within the field of education policy, the weights are based on preferences that are typically elicited from education experts or expert panels. (Levin and McEwan, 2002). Similar methods could, in principle, be used in the context of our framework.

In practice decision-makers cannot directly distribute educational goods or prospects for flourishing. Federal, state and district level decision makers determine how funding is distributed, and how it may be used; they regulate schools by creating incentives and constructing and implementing accountability systems, and by imposing licensing requirements. Decision makers at the school level choose how to allocate students to teachers, which teachers to hire, and what kind of instructional leadership to provide. Classroom teachers decide how to allocate their time, energy and attention within the classroom, and to what end. When doing these things, they are often aiming at (though regularly failing to bring) about one or more of these distributive values

3.1 Adequacy

Adequacy has been an appealing principle in the context of school finance litigation in the US primarily because several state constitutions can be interpreted as requiring that every child receive an adequate education. But provision can only be judged adequate relative to some specified goal. Among the goals philosophical advocates of adequacy have specified are: “earning a living wage”, “functioning as a democratic citizen”, and “being able to participate as an equal in social and political life”.⁸ Those goals each refer to capacities that we have described separately but have presented as contributions to the more ultimate goal of flourishing. So we understand adequate educational provision in terms of the level required for some acceptable (adequate) levels of educational goods that are, in turn, adequate for flourishing in adulthood. Public institutions, in other words, should ensure that everyone has the educational goods adequate to enable them to have a reasonable chance of attaining some threshold level of overall flourishing, in adulthood.⁹

Some advocates of adequacy principles claim that no other distributive principle is needed: as long as everyone has *enough* educational goods, differences between individuals do not matter. Others find this stance unsatisfying. Imagine that everyone is adequately well educated (understanding adequacy however you prefer). Now suppose that new resources are available for educational purposes, and that, however they are distributed, everybody’s education remains adequate. Adequacy gives us no guidance as to how to distribute the new resources. But it seems intuitive that some ways of distributing them are better than others.

3.2 Equality

So one reason to introduce equality as a second distributive principle is to supplement adequacy. Educational goods enrich the lives of those who have them, enabling them to live emotionally healthier, more fulfilling, lives, and contribute more to the projects they care about. Giving children more equal opportunities for their lives to go well would require a more equal distribution of educational goods. Surveys suggest widespread public support for equal opportunity, which is hardly surprising. Given that children are morally equal, equality might seem like a sensible default.¹⁰

⁸ For variants of this view see Gutmann, (1999) pp. 128-139; Curren (1994); Tooley (1995); Anderson (2007) and Satz (2007).

⁹ For defenses of adequacy as a general principle of justice, see Frankfurt (1987) and Raz (1978). For criticism see Casal (2007).

¹⁰ For an explicit defense of equality see Norman (1995). See also Jencks (1988).

Another reason to consider equality is that some educational goods are, in part, what economists call positional goods. That is, their worth, to those who have them, depends in part on how much they have relative to others. When competing for jobs and others positions that are allocated (partly) on the basis of one's holdings of educational goods, what matters is not one's own absolute level, but one's level relative to that of one's competitors. In some contexts, inequalities do no harm to those who have less, but positional goods are different: the fact that some have more than others reduces the competitive chances of those who have less.¹¹

Endorsing a more equal distribution of educational goods does not involve a commitment to egalitarianism with respect to flourishing itself. As we have explained, educational goods provide people with *opportunities*; how wealthy they are, or how well their lives go, may properly depend on their choices, as well as luck. Still, the idea of unequal outcomes is difficult to accept in the case of children. Children, being children, are not fundamentally responsible for their choices, so one might argue that the level of educational goods, or flourishing, enjoyed by adults should not depend on the choices they made as children.

Of course, schooling policy is limited in what it can do to equalize educational goods. Background inequalities of education, wealth, income, and other kinds of advantage inevitably influence how well children respond to educational offerings. It is hard to imagine a society that tolerates extensive background inequalities being willing to distribute public educational resources sufficiently unequally to counteract fully those effects. Although a commitment to equalizing educational goods does not imply a commitment to other kinds of equalization in theory, in practice greater equality of educational goods might depend on greater equality of background conditions. The differences in educational goods resulting from differences in individual capacities to develop educational goods, even among children within the same family, are also difficult to compensate for fully.

When the only way to achieve an equal distribution is to make some people worse off without making others better off, then equality recommends leveling down. It is easy to see why equalizing educational goods might require that. In a society with substantial social and economic inequalities, some children will enjoy very little private investment, and there may be a limit to how well public resources can compensate. That society would have to limit support for advantaged children so that they could not attain more educational goods than could be reached by poorer children. Similarly, some children are born with severe cognitive impairments, and many unimpaired children would require much greater investment to reach levels of educational goods that others could surpass with far less. Equalizing educational goods would involve refraining from fostering – and perhaps even reducing (for example through physical or psychological mistreatment) – the capabilities of talented children.

The cost in terms of productive capacity could be very great. Pursuing equality by any form of leveling down reduces the human capital available to society, reducing material resources and the prospects of life-improving technologies being developed and affordably produced. Investing in the development of highly talented people can pay off for others through their enhanced productivity, which can redound to the benefit of all. Suppose there is indeed a trade-off between equality in the distribution of educational goods, on the one hand, and the total amount of those goods produced, on the other. It may seem perverse to favor equality in those cases where an unequal distribution of educational goods would benefit those who have least.

¹¹ For the classic discussion of positional goods see Hirsch (2005). For their significance in the educational context, see Koski and Reich (2007)

3.3 Benefitting the less advantaged

Concerns of this kind motivate a third principle, which directs us to favor distributions that serve, over time, to benefit the less advantaged.¹² Of course it will be very hard to identify with any precision *which* particular distributions satisfy this rule. There is likely to be disagreement about *how much* inequality with respect to *which* distribuenda is required or permitted by the principle. Still, the general idea that inequalities should be licensed where they are needed to raise those at the bottom is intuitively appealing and is likely to play a role in educational decision making as in other policy areas.

It is important here to define the less advantaged, and the significance of educational goods for their overall opportunities for flourishing. It is one thing to distribute educational goods (or the resources that produce them) in such a way as to increase the *educational goods* possessed by the worse off members of society. It is another thing to distribute educational goods (or relevant resources) in ways that do most for their *overall prospects for flourishing*. This distinction may be particularly salient in the case of the cognitively impaired, whose opportunities for flourishing may not be greatly influenced by their possession of educational goods beyond some threshold. To make their lives go better we might plausibly subordinate their level of educational goods to whatever distribution of educational goods will produce the technological and medical developments most conducive to their well-being.

We ended our discussion of educational goods with an observation about plurality and trade-offs. The same applies here. We typically have to make trade-offs between these different distributive values – sacrificing equality for the sake of benefitting the less advantaged, for example, or choosing to ensure that as many children as possible achieve adequacy rather than helping those with the lowest prospects for flourishing. So policymakers must not only weigh different educational goods against one another, they must also try to get the right balance between the various principles that apply to their distribution. This point is perhaps particularly relevant to discussions of equality, which is sometimes rejected on the simple ground that *full* or *complete* equality (of anything) is a very implausible goal. Equality need not be all or nothing: one could value a move toward a less unequal distribution of educational goods without endorsing strict equality.

4. Independent values

Educational goods and their distribution are key values but they are clearly not the only factors that decision makers need to take into account. Educational goods make an important contribution to flourishing but so do many other goods that compete with them for resources. Even where it is not a matter of allocating resources, the amount and distribution of educational goods that can be achieved must be balanced against other values.

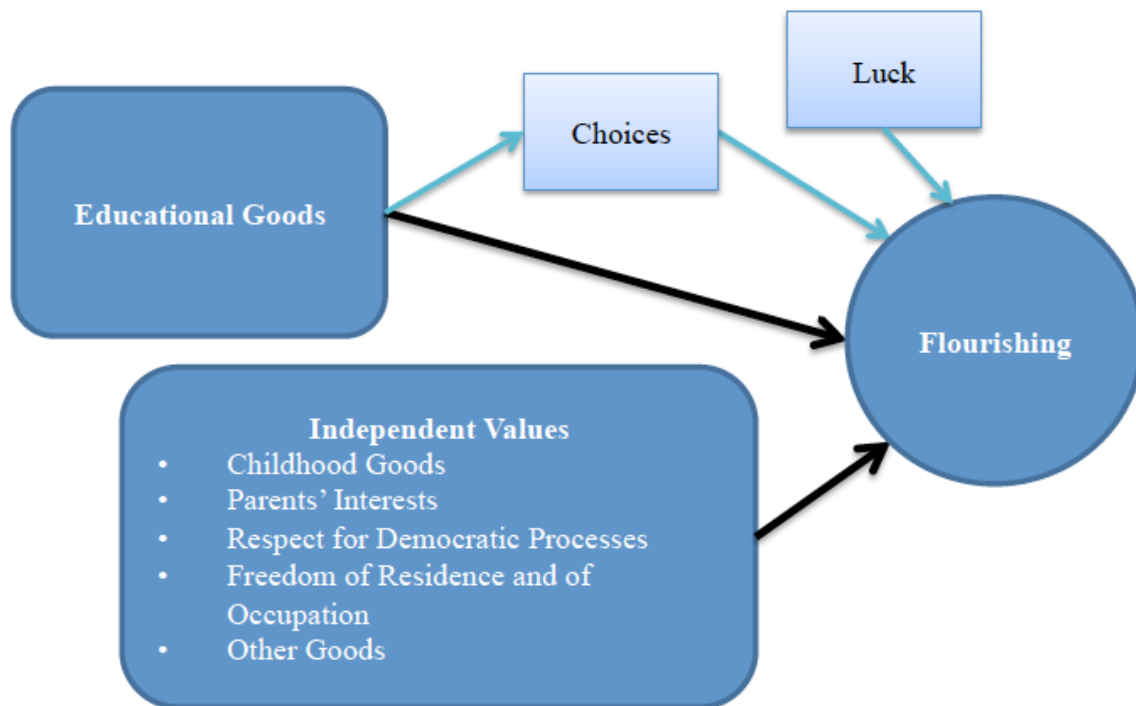
Consider, for example, attempts to move toward greater equality of educational goods. Some policies or practices aimed at increasing equality can be accomplished without excessive cost in terms of other values. For example, public education, which almost certainly mitigates the inequalities that would be produced by an unregulated, privately funded school system, is widely regarded as acceptable. Completely equalizing educational goods, by contrast, would likely require abolishing the family and reducing the capacities of those with greater native abilities.

¹² For a defense see Schouten (2012). The seminal idea here is Rawls's difference principle (Rawls 1971).

Why should society refrain from taking those measures? Not because equalizing educational goods is undesirable, but because these measures conflict with other important values.

We call these ‘independent values’ simply to indicate that they are neither educational goods nor valuable distributions of educational goods. These also contribute to flourishing, but not via the production of educational goods. Although the full set would be unmanageable, the independent values most relevant to educational decisions can usefully be reduced to five: childhood goods, parents’ interests, respect for democratic processes, freedom of residence and of occupation, and other consumption goods. Educational decision makers can systematically assess the merits of the options that they are considering by explicitly considering the implications of those options for these five values, alongside the level and distribution of educational goods.

FIGURE 3



4.1 Childhood goods

The values we described in section 2 largely (though not entirely) concern how the child is supposed to turn out as an adult and spending on education is rightly regarded as investment in the future. Any psychologically realistic theory of flourishing will recognize the formative and developmental importance of childhood. Childhood experiences have profound effects on what a person is like, and therefore what their life is like, in adulthood. But children are more than just adults-in-forma. Childhood is *itself* a significant part of a person’s life, and the quality of a

childhood is intrinsically important, independently of its consequences for the quality of the adulthood that follows.¹³

Some goods may be available *only* in childhood. Purposeless play, naïve curiosity, unreserved joy and carefreeness are the most obvious examples. More controversial additions might include innocence of adult sexuality and unawareness of certain horrors such as violent death and mortal illness. These goods may well contribute to, or even be essential for, healthy development, but children have an interest in experiencing them regardless of their developmental effects.¹⁴ They are good things in themselves, part of a good childhood and a good life. Among equally effective ways of prompting learning, that which least compromises these childhood goods is better. Even in cases where a child would reap some benefit, as an adult, from educational experiences that undermine the special goods of childhood, it still might be better to forego the adult benefit.

Other goods experienced in childhood are not special to that stage of life – e.g., friendship, physical pleasures, and the enjoyment of the process of learning. Missing out on some of these in childhood, as at any other stage of life, can more easily be justified by subsequent benefits. We often deprive children of some goods in the moment for the sake of education that will enable them to get more goods over their lives as a whole. But a childhood is itself part of a life, and the flourishing enjoyed during it should not be discounted. Deficits in childhood matter, even when they are instrumental for benefits later, and should be avoided unless they produce greater prospects for future flourishing. In some circumstances, for example, frequent and rigorous testing might be part of the most effective method for improving achievement, but make some children very anxious at the time. Even if we were confident that a rigorous testing regime were the best strategy for improving children’s performance, and would have no lasting effects on their emotional or psychological development, we might choose to deprive them of *some* of the educational goods that regime could yield for the sake of not making their school days unduly miserable.

4.2 Parents’ interests

Children are normally raised in families, by parents who invest a great deal of time, energy, and emotion, in the well-being of their children. Parents care about how their children are educated and typically feel responsible for seeing that their children’s development goes well. Children often benefit from their parents’ authority over them and from the considerable discretion their parents have over how they are raised. This authority and discretion may also be good for parents, if it allows them to maintain close relationships with their children, raise their children as members of a particular faith, or do their best, by their own lights, for their children.

There is considerable dispute about how much say parents should have in their children’s education. Parents’ wishes may conflict with the development of children’s educational goods such as the capacity for economic productivity or healthy relationships, or with distributive values such as equality. For example, there is an obvious conflict between educational equality and the interest of wealthy parents in conferring advantage on their children.

Different readers will doubtless weigh the different goods and distributive values differently. Our purpose is not to offer any judgments about their relative importance, but instead simply to point out that parents’ interests matter and that the decision maker cannot avoid

¹³ See Gheaus (2015), Brennan (2014) and MacLeod (2010) for variants of this idea.

¹⁴ See Engel (2005).

making a judgment about their weight and the extent to which, and ways in which, respecting them constrains or enhances the promotion of educational goods and their valuable distribution.

4.3 Respect for democratic processes

Some things that decision makers would like to do are not feasible, perhaps because the technologies required are not reliable or are too expensive, or because producing the desired outcomes is impossible given certain institutional features they have no power to change. But sometimes, even when decision makers could technically do what they wanted, they are constrained by respect for democratic processes. For example, they may judge that important distributive values could be realized by redistributing funds away from schools in wealthy neighborhoods to those serving students from the poorest families, and also judge that they could do using opaque mechanisms that would prevent voters from understanding the policy well enough to hold them accountable. If they believe that the voters would, if they understood the policy, oppose it, then they might feel constrained by respect for democracy.

Just as there is a value to individuals having control over their own lives and choices, independently of the quality of their decisions, so there may be a value to people exercising control of their shared environment and the rules (including the rules about education) that apply to them collectively. For many decisions, being made through democratic processes realizes a value that they lack if made in other ways. Sometimes better decisions about the production and distribution of educational goods should be rejected because those decisions could only be implemented by circumventing democratic procedures. Such procedures may exist, and be worthy of respect, at the local level, within a school board or district, or among larger collectives such as the state or even the nation as a whole.¹⁵

4.4 Freedom of residence and of occupation

Some freedoms not directly or obviously connected to education can be in tension with what decision makers might seek to do to produce and distribute educational goods better. Some think that freedom per se is valuable, irrespective of its particular content, but we focus on two specific freedoms that are both independently valuable and particularly pertinent to the design of school systems. One way to reduce educational inequalities might be to restrict people's freedom of residential choice in order to reduce neighborhood, and therefore school, segregation. Alternatively, schools might be more effective if authorities could simply draft adults with special talents to become teachers or school administrators in particular schools - just as countries sometimes conscript people into the military - rather than relying on incentives to influence the occupational choices of individuals. That would restrict people's freedom of occupational choice.

Decision makers must take into account adults' interests in these and other freedoms when pursuing the values concerning children's education, judging which are important enough to serve as legitimate constraints on the promotion and/or valuable distribution of educational goods. As with other values, we cannot offer a precise interpretation of exactly what freedom of occupation and residence amount to. We assume that, in the contemporary US, whatever the actual value of freedom of residence and of occupation, governments will not contemplate

¹⁵ We draw here on the standard liberal distinction between justice and legitimacy. See Rawls (1993).

eliminating the housing market, or conscripting teaching labor. But they might consider other measures that impose costs on residential choice, like imposing higher tax rates on properties in wealthy residential areas than on properties in socio-economically mixed neighborhoods. And the restriction that governments, in practice, cannot conscript labor means that, in pursuit of our distributive values, and more educational goods, it must incur costs it might otherwise be able to avoid. To induce talented people into teaching may require measures such as raising wage rates for teachers in the early part of their career, or reducing the costs of entering the profession with signing bonuses and debt forgiveness.

As with the other values, of course, readers will disagree about exactly what freedoms should be included and how much weight they should have relative to educational values.

4.5 Other goods

Educational goods are very important, especially when understood in the broad way proposed here. But no society would want to devote *all* its resources to the production, or to the valuable distribution, of educational goods. To spend resources on education is to invest in children's future flourishing by producing educational goods. But other goods also contribute to both current and future flourishing. Decisions about how much to spend on education affects what is available for investment in other government and private activities -- health, transport, housing, environmental protection, and so on. Here too it will be a question of balancing values and weighing the contributions that different forms of resource allocation can be expected to make to overall flourishing and its distribution, both current and future.

5. Who decides, whose values?

In our view, being clear about one's values, and how they conflict, enables one to bring to bear the most appropriate evidence, and prepares one to act in line with one's values, whatever they are. Such clarity also helps one subject assumptions about values, and how to weigh them, to critical scrutiny. Even if our view is right, the process only leads to better decisions if the decision-maker, on reflection, values roughly the right things, and there is no guarantee of that. Our goal is not to judge the weights that decision makers place on the different educational goods, distributive principles and independent values, but instead to identify them so that the benefits and tradeoffs are more transparent.

Even with complete clarity, the goals may not be fully attainable within any particular decision maker's context. Political pressures may limit the capacity to influence the production of some of educational goods, and may severely restrict the space for action in pursuit of distributive values. But anyone completely locked in by the demands of voters or lobbyists is not really a decision maker at all, just a mechanism in a causal chain. Further, a decision maker who, within whatever space she has to act, is motivated only by her own interests will find our framework of no interest. That framework is intended simply to assist individual decision makers in identifying and understanding what is, actually, at stake.

Only probabilistic judgments about the likely effects of policies are possible, and in many cases measurement will be a serious problem. The decision maker may simply not know what actions will be best for realizing her goals. But that fact does not mean she should avoid trying to

make those judgments. Paths to some goals – such as student achievement – may be better supported by evidence than paths to other goals – such as treating others as equals. Yet, this difference should not limit the decision maker from considering the full range of values and making a best guess as to the effects of her decisions. Those decisions *will* have effects on those outcomes, whether she likes it, and whether she thinks about them explicitly, or not.

6. Applying the framework

The burden of this paper has been to set out a framework, and a language, for thinking about the values relevant to education policy and policy-related research. We have offered a way of thinking about the varied goals of education and about how educational goods should be distributed. We have also identified other - independent - values that commonly come into play in decisions about schooling, among which childhood goods play a particularly salient role.

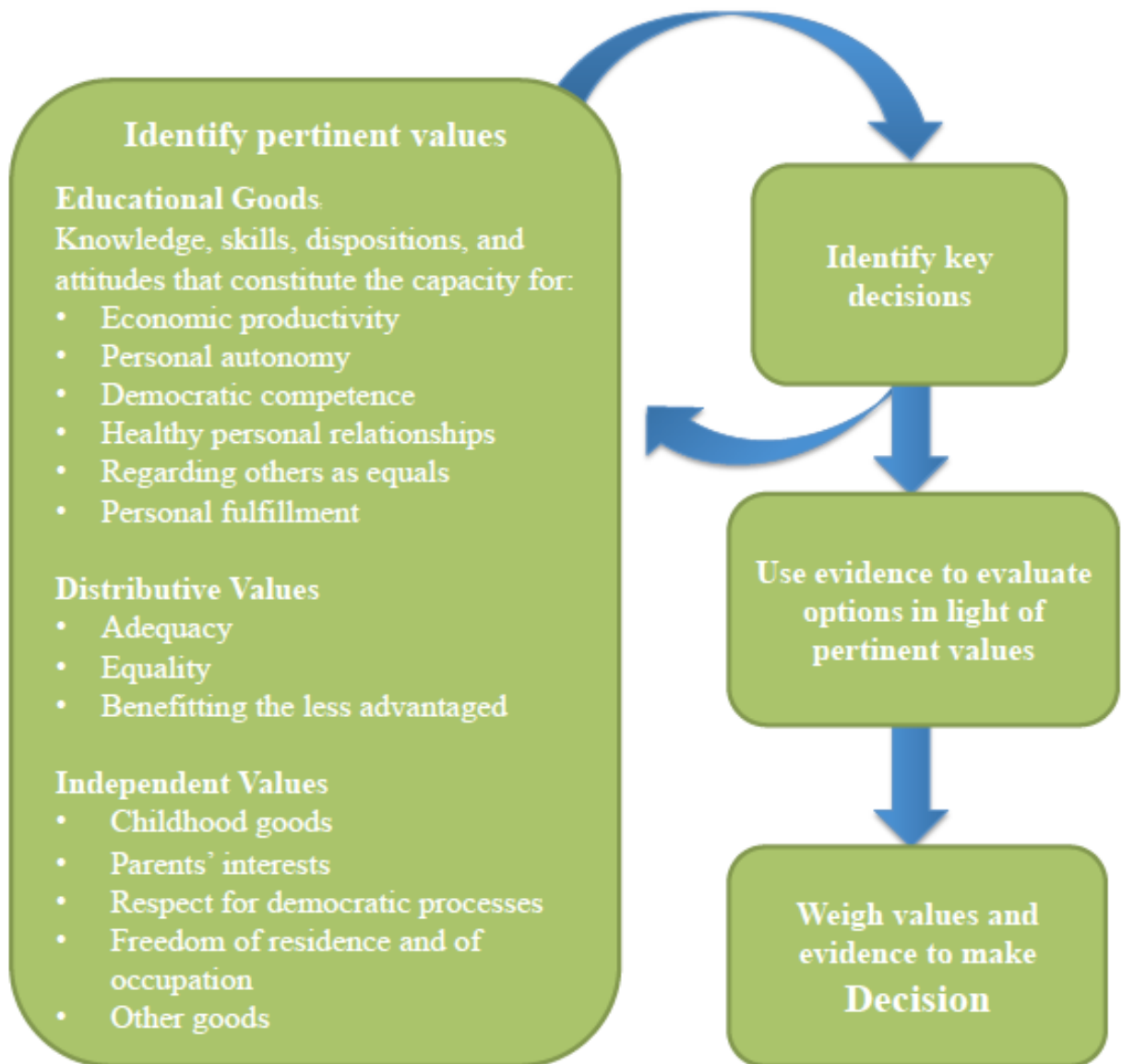
Readers who think the current policy environment overemphasizes some educational goods at the expense of others, or confuses different distributive values, or fails to give proper weight to other values such as childhood goods, will find here a way of formulating their concerns. Nonetheless, readers may also be skeptical about whether the proposed framework can actually be used by decision makers. The only way we can convincingly answer such doubts is by applying it ourselves, in much more detail than is possible here – it will, in fact, take an entire book.¹⁶

Still, we conclude by briefly outlining how this framework can usefully inform decision making. We propose a four-part procedure for making decisions that explicitly combines values and evidence. Although we describe the procedure in terms of ordered steps, it is better to think of the parts simply as distinct elements of the process, all of which need to be addressed, often iteratively and not necessarily in the sequence presented here. Figure 4 illustrates the model.

First, identify the values in play. Which valuable outcomes is the policymaker trying to achieve? What values may conflict with their achievement? Our framework aims to be comprehensive, but not all the values are really at stake in every decision. Sometimes, for example, all the available options may have roughly the same effect on developing the capacity for democratic competence, or affect childhood goods in roughly similar ways, but may vary considerably in their distributive implications. If distributive values are salient, the decision maker may need to decide whether adequacy, equality or benefitting the less advantaged (or some weighted combination of all three) is the real goal.

¹⁶ See [reference deleted for anonymity].

FIGURE 4



The next task is to identify the key decisions relevant to those values. This obviously takes contextual work: it involves figuring out what the feasible options are and, among them, which might have some prospect of furthering the values that actually matter. Sometimes decision makers have a wide range of possible options while at other times they are given only a few distinct options. Someone on a charter authorization board may simply have three proposals for schools, and her options are confined to those three. Alternatively, the Secretary for Education may choose whether to promote the spread of charter schools and, if so, what kind of charter schools to encourage, and what mechanisms to use to promote their spread. The Secretary faces an almost infinite set of options.

These first two steps are often iterative. A decision maker identifies a goal – perhaps to improve the capacity for economic productivity of those students with the least prospects for

flourishing. She then identifies some key decision. She might then need to return to the first step of identifying the values that come into play given the options she can choose among.. For example, a decision maker with the identified aim might consider the option of implementing a test-based accountability policy that provides incentives for school leaders to focus on student achievement on standardized tests and, particularly, on the test performance of subgroups of students who have historically performed poorly on such measures. She has identified her initial goal in the first step and a specific option in the second step, but must then return to the first step to make sure she is considering all the values in play. In doing so, she may realize that a policy that incentivizes student achievement alone could be harmful to other educational goods, such as the capacity for healthy personal relationships. At that point, she might consider other policy options, or modifications of the initial option, that might promote a broader range of educational goods. In terms of the distributive principles, if the policy focuses on getting all students above some threshold, as many such policies do, then adequacy as well as the benefit to the less advantaged come into play, while equality is less salient. Among the independent values, childhood goods may be the most important for this policy, as a focus on achievement might adversely affect the quality of children's experiences in school. The list of considerations that we have identified makes this process manageable, while at the same time, ensuring that it is relatively comprehensive. The decision maker has identified the key issues at stake.

The third step is then to evaluate the options in the light of the pertinent values. Here the evidence is important. For simplicity, consider our charter school authorizer. Suppose the three proposed schools, A, B, and C, are all to be run by rival charter management organizations (CMOs) with track records. Guided by concern for benefiting the least advantaged, she would look at which CMOs have the better record of increasing the achievement of more disadvantaged students. But, aware that it matters that children be equipped with the full range of educational goods, not just those indicated by achievement scores, she will also seek evidence about how well the organizations' other schools prepare students to be democratically competent or to treat other students as moral equals.¹⁷ Similarly, sensitive to the value of childhood goods, she will want information about the quality of the daily lived experience of students in the organizations' other schools. The values guide the search for evidence, and the evidence makes possible the evaluation of the options.

Finally, the decision maker chooses the option with the best expected overall outcome. This fourth step will not always be easy, even with our framework in place, because it will usually involve trade-offs and incomplete information on the consequences of the different choices. Suppose, in the example above, she finds that A is likely to benefit the least advantaged students most in terms of achievement, but will do so using severe disciplinary mechanisms that make the daily lived experience of school a less happy one for many of the children. B does not promote achievement quite as well as A but the evidence suggests it promotes other educational goods better than A does. The decision maker has to make a judgment, often with very imperfect evidence given the metrics readily available to her. Suppose now that C will do better than A or B in terms of promoting democratic competence in particular, though slightly less well for the less advantaged students with respect to other educational goods. To arrive at the best option she has to weigh the goods at stake, and here we have given no guidance for weighing goods. What we have done is explain what the goods are that should be weighed.

While the proposed analytical framework, shown in Figure 4, emphasizes the importance of being clear about values, educational decision makers need also to assess how effective

¹⁷ Levinson (2012).

specific interventions are likely to be in helping to realize them. This means they must be attuned to the challenges of measurement and able to make effective use of social science research. In some cases, the research is very specific to particular contexts and one must be careful in generalizing it to other contexts. Thus, the third element in the decision-making procedure – evaluating the options in the light of the pertinent values - will bear a lot of the weight of the analysis needed to make a good decision. What is distinctive here is that the social science research is used not simply to understand or predict effects, whether intended or unintended, but rather to determine the extent to which specific policy choices are likely to promote or respect the values in play. Empirical evidence must provide information about the implications of policies for those values if it is to be useful.

Consciously or unconsciously, educational researchers are usually motivated by value concerns, however vague or diffuse. The framework presented here offers a way of sharpening those concerns, and a vocabulary for expressing them. Existing research findings can be interpreted and framed in the terms presented here. Moreover, once clear on the range of values at stake, researchers will be better able to focus their efforts on achieving those findings most useful for decision makers.

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